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Finding flaws in Claire Keegan's *Foster* -a close textual reading

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Foster, published in 2010, is the third book by contemporary Irish writer Claire Keegan (b.1968). The story appeared initially in the *New Yorker Magazine.*[1] It is a short novella set in rural Ireland and tells of a young girl who is taken care of over a summer by a couple -who are either relatives or very close friends of the family- as her busy mother prepares to have a new baby. *Foster* was preceded by two collections of short stories, *Antarctica* (1999) and *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). All are published by Faber. Keegan has received generous praise from a number of eminent writers and critics, and, since 2014, *Foster* has been adopted as a study text in the school Leaving Certificate curriculum in Ireland.[2] Popular perception of the book, as gauged by both mainstream and 'social' media, and by book sales, is extremely positive. This impression has been amplified by the academic critical studies which have so far been carried out. This study seeks to add a new dimension to our understanding of Keegan's *Foster,* by looking at four fundamental aspects to the narrative: location, timeframes, namelessness, and the age of the girl. None of these areas have been properly examined or explored and yet each can provide a new and revealing perspective on the text, helping to elucidate the approach of the author.

By this close-reading analysis, we will see that Keegan isn't

always as careful a writer as she might be, as there seem to be errors in her use of both locale and the timeframe of the story. In regard to her management of characters' onomastic identities, Keegan appears to do a difficult juggling act between her ambitious literary vision and the more mundane demands of literary verisimilitude. Not stating the age of the girl at the centre of the story is a tantalizing literary strategy, but it is also a potential cause for reader confusion. Critics and commentators, arguably, have tended to say little about what might be potentially difficult-to-explain aspects of Keegan's narratives and have rather focused on the elements and aspects which confirm that she is a breath of fresh air in Irish letters, a writer who can 'torch the thatched cottage' of old-style approaches to writing about rural Irish life.[3] Claire Keegan may well be that, but there are still aspects to her narratives which have not been addressed satisfactorily and which remain fertile for inquiry and further probing.

Each of the four areas of inquiry -location, timeframes, namelessness, and the age of the girl- will be dealt with section by section. Within each section, a few different points will be looked at, generally in order of importance. No formal overarching argument is proposed. The overall aim is simply to cast light upon fundamental and quantifiable aspects of the narrative of *Foster* which may present challenges to the reader's comprehension of the story, and to do so in a way which isolates each area for manageable discussion and inquiry. I conclude that there is much yet to discuss, to probe, and to question, in the author's approach to her material, much that has not been addressed adequately by any of the eminent writers and critics who have commented upon Keegan's work. I aver that critical approbation has tended to gloss over the cracks.

Location

The opening lines of the story appear to give precise details of location and journey, but these details, as we will see, present a cartographical problem:

> 'Early on a Sunday, after first Mass in Clonegal, my father, instead of taking me home, drives deep into Wexford towards the coast where my mother's people came from. It is a hot day, bright, with patches of shade and greenish, sudden light along the road. We pass through the village of Shillelagh where my father lost our red Shorthorn in a game of forty-five, and on past the mart in Carnew where the man who won the heifer sold her shortly afterwards.'

The problem with this description is that the very small village of Shillelagh, which is in Co. Wicklow, is situated about twelve kilometres northeast of Clonegal, which is in Co. Carlow, and is therefore not on the way to Wexford which would only be reached by driving south, southeast or east.[4] Shillelagh is not on the way to Carnew either. Carnew is situated twelve kilometres east of Clonegal, and eight kilometres southeast of Shillelagh. Passage through Carnew would bring a driver to Wexford, but it should be noted that Carnew is in Wicklow, not in Wexford. So, to summarize, the girl's father drives to a small village in the opposite direction of where they need to go, and not into Wexford, but rather into Wicklow, and by doing so adds twenty kilometres to the journey. From Clonegal to Carnew the distance by road is twelve kilometres, but the detour to Shillelagh means driving twelve kilometres north, then eight kilometres south. There is no rationale stated in the text for doing this. It could be that the father doesn't know the roads well,

but at the end of the book, Mr Kinsella, who seems very knowledgeable about many things, travels to Shillelagh also [79], before arriving at the girl's home in Clonegal. Mention of passing through Carnew is understandable, as it is on the road between Gorey (in Wexford) and Clonegal, but driving to Shillelagh would clearly, again, constitute an entirely unnecessary detour.

Their destination is never named but soon after arriving at the house of the Kinsellas, who will take care of the girl for the summer, Mr Kinsella mentions having heard 'how the priest in Kilmuckridge prayed for rain that very morning' [6]. This suggests that the Kinsellas live rather close to Kilmuckridge, which is a very small village not far from the Wexford coast, south east of Clonegal. From a later episode, where Mr Kinsella takes the girl for a walk at night-time to the beach, we must assume that their house is less than two kilometres from the seaside.

These details will have absolutely no impact on the average reader, of course, but they might raise an eyebrow for those who know the area, and for readers and critics who find it interesting to examine the nuts and bolts of a text. One might wonder precisely why the author states something which is clearly not accurate. The girl's father does not 'drive deep into Wexford toward the coast', as Shillelagh and Carnew are both still inside Wicklow county, and the northerly detour to Shillelagh simply doesn't make sense, and yet it is a detour carried out by both the girl's father and Mr Kinsella. It is all the more baffling as Claire Keegan was born and grew up in Wicklow.

One other aspect to this question of travelling from Clonegal to somewhere near Kilmuckridge by car concerns the fact that the father drives back home having forgotten to leave the girl's case, with her clothes and whatever personal items were packed into it. The distance is not great by any means, 40 kilometres or less, one-way, and the girl's

mother, who seems very attentive to the girl, brushing and weaving the girl's plaits that very morning [9], is likely to insist her husband bring it back to her. Yet, this imposition of verisimilitude would damage the story's subsequent narrative. This is where the author's phrase 'deep into Wexford' gains its greatest traction, making the distance covered sound much further than it actually is.

Another aspect regarding location in *Foster* is to do with the Kinsellas' apparent proximity to the sea, as mentioned above. In Chapter Five, Mr Kinsella takes the girl for a walk to the seaside one evening. It is an important moment in the text, in which the girl and Kinsella bond emotionally, yet it does raise an interesting question: if the shore is within walkable distance, why is it that the only time the girl is taken there is on one occasion and that occasion being after sunset when it is dark? The months that the girl stays with them are the summer months and on their visit to Gorey the first thing the girl notices are 'beach balls', a 'see-through dolphin', and 'plastic spades and matching buckets, moulds for sand castles' [43-4]. Clearly the residents of Gorey, which is about six kilometres from the seaside, must take their children to the beach. If the Kinsellas live at less than two kilometres distance, one must wonder why they never take her there, except on that one occasion, which is at night-time. It may simply be an element which we must accept as readers, but because the time when Kinsella takes the girl to the seaside is clearly a moment of great happiness for the child, it would seem reasonable that he would take her again, and presumably at a more reasonable time of the day, or that the girl would ask to be taken. And, furthermore, anyone living so close to the sea would be more connected to it than the Kinsellas seem to be.

The only other general observation which can be made about the setting of *Foster* is that Claire Keegan has written many stories set

in rural Ireland and is seen by many, whether true or not, as having managed to re-invent the parametres of Irish short stories about the countryside.

Timeframes

While stating that the girl is driven to the Kinsellas on a Sunday, there is no mention of which month the story begins in, or ends, and no mention of months anywhere in the text. There is no mention of the girl's age either, but the reader may assume, from certain elements in the narrative, and from second-hand sources, like author interviews and book reviews, that the girl is about ten years old. We will look into this in greater depth later. At around this age, the girl would of course be obliged to attend primary school, and in Ireland, the months of July and August would be the traditional summer holiday months. Therefore, the story likely opens in early July, and ends around the end of August, just before the school term starts. All of this the reader must assume, but it is relatively easy to do so. With one proviso: Monday, August 31st, 1981 was Summer Bank Holiday and school would only have started after this date, and school in Ireland traditionally starts on a Monday. In 1981, the Monday on which school began was September 7. (Note: we will address why 1981 is taken as the year in which the story takes place below.)

There are eight chapters in all. The first two chapters are both set on the first day, the day of the girl's arrival. Chapter Three covers her second day with the Kinsellas. Chapter Four is the shortest by far, finishing after only three pages and a bit, and yet the period covered in Chapter Four is by far the longest, covering weeks, and possibly even eighty per cent of her stay. If so, the bulk of her stay, of at least six weeks, is recounted in only just over three pages. Mostly this chapter focuses on the apparently happy daily life the girl experiences with the

Kinsellas. Mention is made of visits by friends of the Kinsellas and the party-like atmosphere created by these visits. Chapter Five is by far the longest, at over 26 pages and the girl moves through no less than five distinct 'acts', in five different locations: (a) at home with the Kinsellas, (b) in the town of Gorey, (c) at a wake for a neighbour who has passed away, (d) in the company of a gossipy and not-very-nice neighbour, and (e) with Mr Kinsella, walking to the shore at night-time. Chapter Six, all of four pages, might be seen as the beginning of the end of her sojourn, with the arrival of the long-awaited letter from the girl's mother asking the Kinsellas to send her back, and the girl's noting of the appearance of school-related items in the shops. Indeed, in the letter, the girl's mother states that school starts on Monday. From subsequent details we can note that the letter must have arrived on Thursday. Chapter Seven, also short, at five pages, covers only the next day, Friday. Chapter Eight covers Saturday, and Sunday, the day Mr & Mrs Kinsella take the girl back to her family's home.

This account of the chaptering in the book may suggest that the author is doing a few different things: by giving two whole chapters to the first day and another to the second, Keegan is providing the reader with a close-up view of the initial experience of her stay, perhaps because it is first impressions which have the greatest impact for the girl, especially as life at the home of the Kinsellas seems to be so much more liberating and happy than life at her familial home. Furthermore, that the longest period of the girl's stay is given the shortest attention by the text suggests that the author wishes to focus rather on the drama of the story than on what is hoped the reader will pick up as an easy-to-understand account of the passing of time in idyllic happiness. The cramming of so much action and drama into Chapter Five remains uncommented-upon (by critics etc.) as a narrative progression, but the

contrast it makes with other chapters might also suggest that the author is doing rather a lot with one chapter. The whole first day, for example, is given two distinct chapters. In its defence, Chapter Five takes place on only one day, a Saturday, and the huge whirl of the activity on that day is perhaps designed to capture the young girl's experience of it all as a day distinct from all the others.

However the chapters flow, any readers' comments I have read have almost all accorded that the narrative as a whole has pace and runs smoothly. The shortness of the novella of course may influence such a reading, as might the meagreness of words per page, about 200 words plus, a very easy reading-hill to climb.

One historically specific reference mentioned in the narrative has been noted by critics, that in Chapter Three the Kinsellas talk about that day's news concerning the death of a hunger striker (note that in 1981, a total of ten Republican prisoners died on hunger strike in a demand for political recognition, from May to August):

> ‘“They said on the early news that another striker is dead.”
> “Not another?”
> “Aye. He passed during the night, poor man. Isn't it a terrible state of affairs?”
> “God rest him,” the woman says. “It's no way to die.”’ [31]

As this is from Chapter Three, which covers day two of the girl's stay, we must assume that the news refers to a hunger striker who died in early July. Since the previous death was in May this is easy to do: the news must refer either to the fifth man to die, Joe McDonnell, who died on July 8, or Martin Hurson, who died on July 13. This means that the girl must have arrived at the Kinsellas either on July 7 or 12. Since this

news indicates that the year setting is 1981, a look at the calendar for that year shows that July 7 was a Tuesday, and July 12 was a Sunday. Ipso facto, the girl is driven to the Kinsellas' house on July 12, 1981, and the hunger striker in question is Martin Hurson, who died at 4.30am in the early hours of July 13.[5] Of course, whether this kind of precision makes any difference to the enjoyment of the story is debatable. However, later in the text there is yet another historical reference, one which has not yet been commented upon, and which does shed revealing light on Keegan's approach.

In Chapter Five, at the wake for a neighbour known to the Kinsellas, mention is made of the people who attend, many of whom are farmers, and the fact that they discuss an upcoming election:

> 'They talk of the forecast and the moisture content of corn, of milk quotas and the next general election.'

The detail is scant, but the reader must assume that 'the next general election' must be one which is imminent and therefore on everyone's lips, not some general election in a far-off future. This being so, we are left with a problem: in 1981 there was only one general election, and it was held on June 11. The Dáil, as the Irish parliament is termed in Ireland, was dissolved on May 21st, meaning that the wake would have to be anytime between May 21st and early June. This potentially throws the timeframe adduced above completely up into the air, if we were to think it of any importance. Again, for the vast majority of readers, it is not important, but for those who expect accuracy from the text, it may be another indication that Claire Keegan doesn't always do her homework. They would point out that the girl couldn't possibly be with the Kinsellas so early in the year, as school was still on. It is all the more

baffling because Chapter Five, arguably, takes place at a time which is very close to the time when she will leave and go back to her familial home, therefore late August.

To follow on directly from the previous point, what there is to argue about in terms of precisely when the events of Chapter Five occur concerns the opening of Chapter Six:

'After a week of rain, on a Thursday, the letter comes.'

It is impossible to say with one hundred percent accuracy that 'After a week of rain' means either (1) one week immediately after the events in Chapter Five, a week in which it rained every day, or (2) a week temporally unconnected to the events of Chapter Five. My feeling as a reader tends to see (1) as the simplest and most correct interpretation, and that if the author wished to suggest that this week of rain occurred weeks after the events of Chapter Five she might have made that more clear, but I must accept (2) as potentially correct. As we have noted above regarding the Summer Bank Holiday, we can infer that the girl must still be living with the Kinsellas at the beginning of September. The letter arrives in Kinsellas' house on Thursday, September 3rd. Chapter Seven takes place on Friday 4th and Chapter Eight covers Saturday 5th and Sunday 6th, the next day being the start of the new school year. So, to summarize, the girl arrived at the Kinsellas on July 12 and was brought back to her parents on September 6, 1981. Yes, *Foster* is fiction, but its use of historical background details grounds that fiction within a non-fictional framework. If the author alters any of the historical background details, it is up to the reader to figure out why, and to try to understand what the alteration adds, in a literary sense, to the narrative. The purpose here remains unclear.

Namelessness

The literary strategy to keep the narrator or main protagonist nameless is a feature in other Keegan stories, like 'The Parting Gift' and 'The Burning Palms', which, incidentally or not, share with *Foster* the theme of problematic parenting. It is perhaps relatively easy to maintain anonymity in a short story, especially for the narrator, but for a story which is the length of even a short novella, in which the narrator comes into contact with many people and their speech is reproduced directly, it is much more difficult. Namelessness also has the potential to become a conspicuous element in the story.

Names generally aid interaction and don't always have to imply closeness, although the idea of whether to use first or family name usually depends on closeness, social situation and/or other personal factors. This of course is a fertile area for any teller of stories. The idea of a nameless central character, however, may also entice from a literary point of view, just as in Kafka's *The Trial,* the central character's very minimal name, simply the letter K, engenders mystery and sets off thought processes which may lead one to wonder about the identity and the universality of that particular character. An unnamed character, after all, could be anyone, and that in itself carries strong literary resonance. Critic Vivian Valvano Lynch also comments usefully on Keegan's possible strategy in *Foster*: 'Her namelessness, like that of the boy in [Joyce's] "Counterpoints", becomes a metaphor for the realities of her short life lacking identity and recognition.'[6] In this reading, the girl's lack of identity connotes the situation she is coming from: a home in which she is just another child. However, on a practical level, namelessness in a lengthy fictional narrative may also create problems which run up against the idea of verisimilitude. From personal

experience, growing up in Ireland, the names of aunts or close friends of the family were essential parts of their existence, whether in direct address or as part of their identity, and for an adult never to say the name of a child in their charge, especially over period of months, would be highly unusual, to say the least.

The girl in *Foster* is addressed directly as 'a Leanbh' ['Child' in Irish Gaelic] once, 'Child' four times, 'Girleen' once, 'Good girl' once, 'Girl' once, 'Petal' twice, 'Long legs' once, and indirectly as 'the wee girl' once. These stand-in monikers, while affectionate, compensate for the author's decision not to have the child named; readers will diverge on whether the strategy holds up for the length of the narrative.

In *Foster* not only is the girl at the centre of the narrative not named, the girl rarely refers to Mrs Kinsella as anything but 'the woman'. Claire Keegan has spoken on the subject in direct relation to *Foster,* and while, in my opinion, authorial opinions beyond a narrative shouldn't hold much weight, it is still interesting to hear from the author, post-publication. In 2014, Claire Keegan visited St Columba's College in Dublin and answered a number of questions asked by students who had read the book. Below is the transcript of one exchange. I believe her answer needs to be quoted in full in order to cast as much light on this area of inquiry as possible. Q: 'Why does she just call the woman "woman"?'[7]

> 'I think that where I came from is a very odd place! And I don't think that's any exaggeration! We're all a bit strange about names and a name can first of all give you a huge amount of information about a family, if you know a surname. Whose son you are, whose daughter you are.

> The second thing about a name is that it really can be affectionate to call someone by their name and I remember when I went to New Orleans to go to university when I was 17 people introducing themselves to me and to other people and I found it very strange to have my name said and my hand shaken. It just seemed like a huge and adult formality. Adults would have names for each other which had degrees of distance and affection. Children if they were not given a name to address someone by or us - if you were brought into the House and you were the girl and I was Mrs Kinsella, if I did not say to you 'Call me Edna or Auntie Edna or Mrs Kinsella' - you would not know what to call me. So you couldn't call me anything. It was a way of keeping you at arm's length, by not telling you what you can call me or how you can address me. I think one of the things that Mrs Kinsella did was she did not want to get too fond of the girl; I think she had a fear of getting too fond of a child who she knew she would have to lose at the end of the summer. And so one of the ways she handled this -and I think handled it well- was to give her no name to address her by. It's again the power of naming or not giving someone a name. Also it's a story about when you're a child you really don't know what's going on a lot of the time and when you're in a strange place with people you've never met before or have no memory of ever having met, you're landed in deep water and you're not quite sure how to carry on and with this situation I think that not being told what to call her was part of the portrait of not knowing what was going on.'

Keegan's answer boils down to the idea that Mrs Kinsella 'did not want to get too fond of the girl', that 'she had a fear of getting too fond of a child who she knew she would have to lose at the end of the summer.'

This seems reasonable, but it also tends to lay quite a burden of meaning on using names, when, in most circumstances, names are part and parcel of the business of interacting with others, especially at close quarters, and over any length of time.

The girl refers to Mrs Kinsella as 'Mrs Kinsella' only ten times throughout the entire narrative, but much more often as 'the woman': for example, in just the first four chapters, against two mentions of 'Mrs Kinsella', the girl terms her as 'the woman' no less than seventeen times. In contrast, the girl refers to Mr Kinsella as 'Kinsella' throughout the narrative. Whether this implies greater closeness or not, readers of *Foster* might conclude that her relationship with Mr Kinsella is closer than that with Mrs Kinsella.[8] If so, as Keegan hints at in her spoken answer above, Mrs Kinsella's strategy has worked, and namelessness has kept them relatively estranged. However, the impression that Mrs Kinsella is less emotionally attached to the girl than her husband doesn't play out very convincingly, if we look at the details.

While in the final scene it is to Mr Kinsella that the girl rushes in a sudden impulse of emotion, it is clear that Mrs Kinsella is highly affected by the imminent prospect of not seeing the girl again, as she weeps openly inside the car. In fact, from the beginning Mrs Kinsella has shown affection for the girl and that affection is clearly reciprocated in Chapter Two when the girl takes her hand as they walk back from the well to the house:

> 'I try to remember another time when I felt like this and am sad because I can't remember a time and happy, too, because I cannot.' [24]

In Chapter Two, Mrs Kinsella takes it upon herself to wash the girl, and

to wash her very thoroughly in the bath. In Chapter Three Mrs Kinsella yet again shows an extraordinary degree of affection, physical and close-up in the way that a mother would behave:

> 'The woman sits me on her lap through it all [the nine o'clock news, which carries many distressing stories] and idly strokes my bare feet.
> "You have nice long toes," she says. "Nice feet."
> Later she makes me lie down on the bed before I go to sleep and cleans the wax out of my ears with a hair clip.' [35]

These actions, and subsequent interchange with the girl, give the distinct impression that Mrs Kinsella does indeed feel affection for the girl, and may even be treating her as the daughter she never had. In light of this, it is difficult to maintain the idea suggested by the author that Mrs Kinsella wishes to keep the girl at a distance. Keegan's expressed post-publication idea that Mrs Kinsella 'did not want to get too fond of the girl' is clearly belied by her behaviour in the story. And yet, as the story is, Mrs Kinsella does not give the child a name she can call her by or even once call her by her actual name.

The pattern of namelessness may be so ingrained in the narrative to make readers ignore the fact that no-one asks the girl's name, even by the ladies on the streets of Gorey, or by those attending the wake. So, by the time we get to the later chapters, it is hardly to be noted that no-one mentions or asks the name of the girl's new baby brother. This of course contradicts most people's experience. It is not mentioned in the letter or at the house when they arrive there in Chapter Eight. Names of new babies, however, are often the first thing people ask.

More alarmingly, it may be also noted that the Kinsellas, once the

truth is out, do not identify their deceased son by his name. They have kept his room intact, as indicated by the child-suitable wallpaper [26] in the room where the girl sleeps, and yet they never mention him to the girl, until she finds out about what happened in the ugliest of ways. On the night when she learns that he died in an accident, when Mr Kinsella takes the girl to the shore, there is no mention by the girl or Mr Kinsella of the son. The son is not named or talked about then, or later, even by Mrs Kinsella, in any of the subsequent chapters. This is probably a narrative strategy to indicate that the Kinsellas' memory of him and their feelings about losing him is acute, and beyond words. Or, it may be a strategy to suggest that the Kinsellas harbour a feeling of terrible shame for not preventing such an incident. Yet, for all intents and purposes, in the narrative, by virtue of the Kinsellas' unwillingness to speak of him, the son's identity is largely non-existent. Quite simply put: we never learn anything about him, excepting the bald details of his death, from the mouth of the extremely unpleasant Mildred. Not providing him with a name is a large part of the erasure or non-existence of the dead son. It can be seen as a literary strategy within the confines of the narrative, the success of which is open to debate, but also as an emotional strategy within the fictional lives of the Kinsellas. Regarding the latter, keeping quiet about a deceased child may well be a strategy adopted by some parents, but I would suggest that most would take any opportunity they could to talk about that child, so that his or her life could be celebrated, not kept under wraps. This, of course, is a huge subject and cannot be properly addressed here, but it is a subject which has been avoided by all critics I have read.

The age of the girl

We are never told the age of the girl, but we should be able to

reconstruct it fairly closely by observing her perceptions, behaviour and use of language. For the record, however, the journalist who interviewed Claire Keegan in *The Scotsman* puts the girl's age at about ten, with the proviso that 'her age, like her name, remains unknown'.[9] It's likely that Keegan was given the opportunity to review this article before it was published, and if so, she obviously found little to argue with that estimate.

Her integral childishness resides in a number of areas: the language she uses to tell her story, the language she uses to interact with others, what attracts her attention, how she thinks, and her general behaviour. Because of this, a comprehensive attempt to determine her age would require a study by itself. What follows then is rather a less ambitious attempt to isolate and examine certain moments which provide a way into our understanding of the girl's age, and what this can tell us about the author's approach.

Critic Claudio Luppino writes of the 'author's overhanging presence', in the notion that the child's thoughts can, at least on two or three occasions, seem overly precocious, as in Chapter Two, p.26, when the girl philosophizes: 'Everything changes into something else, turns into some version of what it was before.'[10] The first half of the observation could well suit the mind of an observant child, but the second involves a complexity not usually appropriate, simply from a language point of view, for a ten-year-old. Earlier, in Chapter One, p.11, the girl muses, as her father leaves her with the Kinsellas: 'I am in a spot where I can neither be what I always am nor turn into what I could be.' This is not mentioned by Luppino, but it would also seem to fit her description of 'too philosophical for a child her age'. Do ten-year-old children think like this, and do they muse the existential difficulty of their situation? Yet, whether these moments of sophistication reveal the

presence of the author or simply add a mysterious dimension to the girl, the reader is apprised from the very beginning of the girl's intelligence. We are made aware of her self-consciousness (thinking of herself as 'wild as a tinker's child' [5]) and of her imaginative forays (imagining what the Kinsellas will be like [4-5]), and so we can likely accept the occasional overly-precocious expression. Sometimes, however, her imaginative observations defy easy explanation, as at the start of the lunch scene:

> 'She [Mrs Kinsella] looks at the wall as though a picture is hanging there but there is no picture there on that wall, just a big mahogany clock with two hands and a big copper pendulum, swinging.' [10]

The reader may well ask how a person can look at a wall 'as though a picture is hanging there'. It may be an attempt to illustrate the girl's ability to interpret the behaviour of those around her (and/or of her imagination), always a good thing to be able to do, but it presents quite a challenge to imagine how this could be done and how the girl could have thought it.

The girl's interaction with those around her seems appropriate for a young child, but a child who is either younger than ten, or a child whose background has somehow inhibited her development. Typically, adults speak to her in a very simple and uncomplicated way, and she answers in kind, as the following exchange between her and Mr Kinsella illustrates:

> '"Can you run?"
> "What?"
> "Are you fast on your feet?" he says.

> "Sometimes," I say.
> "Well, run down there to the end of the lane as far as the box and run back."
> "The box?" I say.
> "The post box. You'll see it there. Be as fast as you can."' [32]

There is nothing linguistically or intellectually challenging in this, but there is seldom anything linguistically or intellectually challenging for the girl in any of the exchanges throughout the length of the story. It could as well be a five-year-old as a ten-year-old talking to an adult. Later, we learn of the girl's reading ability, which seems a little slow for her age:

> 'At first, I struggled with some of the bigger words but Kinsella kept his fingernail under each, patiently, until I guessed it and then did this myself until I no longer needed to guess, and read on.' [74]

Taken with the girl's quite simple and uncluttered spoken language, this reading scene might indicate that the girl's home education is not as robust as it might be. Interestingly, Keegan's upbringing, in a rural home among many siblings, seems to resonate here:

> '"There wouldn't have been too many books in the house," she says, laughing. "Maybe a few lying about in an upstairs press [cupboard], and few Mills & Boons that an aunt used to bring around…"'[11]

(As an aside, this moment of resonance with the girl might help to elucidate why the girl is kept nameless.)

These observations regarding the child's interchange with others help to explain how a child of ten years might appear to be, and to sound, much younger: her intellectual and linguistic development may have been stalled somewhat by the environment of her day-to-day upbringing. Her internal musings hint at an older self, but they do so in decided contrast to her external expression.

In terms of general behaviour, however, the girl seems to have adopted no bad habits from her usual life. Indeed, she is extraordinarily well behaved. From my own personal experience, I could never imagine my children using the money they had been given for sweets to buy ice-creams and chocolate for the adults (see Chapter Five), or to heed the words of the adults around her so obediently. To a degree, the girl is almost too well-behaved, causing no trouble whatsoever for the Kinsellas, and on a daily basis over months, until, of course, she almost drowns herself (in Chapter Seven).

The girl is also extremely passive, a trait which may be endearing, but is also at times, a little difficult to accept. The scene at the beginning of Chapter Two in which Mrs Kinsella washes the naked girl very thoroughly in a bath is a case in point. First of all, the girl has just arrived at the house, and must surely feel a little strange to be there. She hasn't seen Mrs Kinsella before, except when she was a baby in a pram [7], and yet she strips off her clothes very easily and succumbs to what most Irish children, in my recollection anyway, would call water torture: a bath. The girl remains entirely passive throughout and Mrs Kinsella entirely active throughout, not only soaping her 'all over with a cloth' but scrubbing her feet, prizing out the dirt under her nails 'with tweezers', lathering her hair with shampoo and then rinsing it off. It is a remarkable scene, no doubt designed to show Mrs Kinsella's love and care for the child. Yet, is it age-appropriate? At the age of ten, a child

has a highly developed sense of self-consciousness, in both positive and negative ways. A child of ten is entirely able to do everything physically by themselves, of course including bathing. This child clearly has a high sense of self-consciousness and is not physically lazy ('I am unused to sitting still and do not know what to do with my hands.' [11]) She should be well able to take care of bathing. Yet, in the subsequent scene, the activities of dressing and grooming are also taken care of by Mrs Kinsella. The girl's passivity in all of this may be acceptable as a sign of her helplessness and the transformed nature of new existence, but it may also tend to make her seem much, much younger than she otherwise seems to be, or as is indicated by her more mature observations. Washing, dressing and grooming a child of ten years old, as Mrs Kinsella does here, may be seen as acceptable by some readers, but others may find it simply difficult to comprehend.[12]

As stated, this can only be a partial investigation into the child's apparent age. Even so, we can see that the author goes from depicting the girl as both very young and also as very mature. Whether it concerns her wetting the bed, *a la* young Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as* a *Young Man,* linguistically as well as behaviourally ('I wake in this new place to the old feeling of being hot and cold, all at once'), or whether she's picturing herself 'lying in a dark bedroom with other girls, saying things we won't repeat when the morning comes', the girl seems to wander between two distinct developmental consciousnesses. This has implications on how convincing Keegan's child character will be taken by the reader. Such an aspect of the girl has not been examined in any great detail by critics.

Conclusion

The sum total of all these observations points toward the need by critics

to lay greater attention on the text, and on the nuts and bolts of the text, as a means of assessing the writer's skill as a storyteller. Critics and semi-critics have tended to gloss over elements which sometimes defy straightforward comprehension, or they have simply chosen not to look at the elements of her narrative carefully, tending to focus rather on broader, more recognizably 'literary criticism' ideas. Despite devoting an entire chapter to *Foster,* for example, critic Declan Kiberd didn't think to check the various locales mentioned in the story, and his assumption that 'Petal' is the girl's actual name is clearly unwarranted.[13] It may also represent a critical shortcut, allowing him to discuss elements more traditionally associated with literary criticism, like 'themes'.

Kiberd shows a similar desire to cut through the problematic complicatedness of the Kinsellas' lack of disclosure of their son's death in order to create a neat theory explicating their rationale, and thereby streamlining his approbatory assessment of the whole.[14] Yet, the Kinsellas' lack of disclosure is in fact extremely problematic and requires a whole dedicated study by itself, and one which doesn't assume that the author has necessarily been wholly skilful in its construction. As we can see at a more fundamental level of story-making, Claire Keegan is sometimes loose with the material she plays with. There is no discernible rationale behind the insertion of a geographical detour at the opening and ending of the story, nor in the mishandling of the timeframe, as exposed in the mention of a general election which can't possibly accord with the timeframe of the story. These are portals into the author's approach, which is clearly, at times, slipshod and careless. While none of these tiny details would make one iota of difference to the general reader's experience of the text, knowledge that such is part of the author's approach must surely give any serious reader of her

work pause when assessing the construction of more complex narrative elements. And, as I believe this study illustrates, complex narrative elements, like namelessness or the age of the girl, may contain as many mystifying, eye-brow-raising facets as the supposedly more superficial aspects. This is the real value of close reading: we can see that a writer should take care of the small as well as the great in the construction of a fictional world. And it is the responsibility of the critic to point this out when such attention to detail, even seemingly unimportant detail, is not depicted correctly or convincingly.

Notes:-

Edition of *Foster* used here: paperback first edition by Faber, 2010.

1) '*Foster* was originally published in the *New Yorker* in February 2010 and revised and expanded for individual publication later that year…' See Vivian Valvano Lynch's article, p.133, '"Families can be awful places": The Toxic Parents of Claire Keegan's Fiction', in *New Hibernia Review,* 19:1, Spring 2015, 131-146.
2) Commenting on her debut collection, *Antarctica, The Times Literary Supplement,* invokes comparison with Joyce's *Dubliners.* For *Walk the Blue Fields,* her second collection, Colm Tóibín writes that 'These stories are pure magic…' stating that Keegan is now 'a canonical presence in Irish fiction'; Hilary Mantel talks of 'Immaculate structure…' and Anne Enright calls them 'Perfect short stories…' The English and Creative Writing Dept. of the University of Aberdeen describes Claire Keegan as 'one of the finest prose writers in the world, and arguably Ireland's best living writer of short stories.' Acclaimed author David Mitchell states that Claire Keegan is 'as good as Chekhov'. Academic criticism proper is now beginning to get underway, and, so far, all of it chimes in with the reviewers. Eminent critic of Irish literature Declan Kiberd has stated that Claire Keegan is 'a writer already touched by greatness.' (Quotes are easily accessible, taken from reviews or found online.)
3) To quote Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, and her article 'Claire Keegan's New Rural Ireland: Torching the Thatched Cottage', in *Reimagining Ireland: The Irish Short Story,* Vol. 63, eds. Elke D'hoker & Stephanie Eggermont, pp.278-296.
4) In the present era, Google Maps is easily accessible for such information, also Google Earth. I also consulted a paper map dated about 1995.
5) https://web.archive.org/web/20051220030321/http://larkspirit.com/hungerstrikes/bios/hurson.html, accessed November 20, 2019.
6) See Valvano Lynch (2015), p.133.
7) http://www.sccenglish.ie/2014/03/claire-keegan-and-foster.html, accessed November 20, 2019.

8) Perhaps this is because Mr Kinsella has two important scenes with the girl, the walk to the sea and the final moment when the girl runs to him and embraces him. Declan Kiberd seems to think Kinsella makes the greater impression: 'it is the foster father (rather than his wife) who is the epitome of sensitivity and tact'. See p.456 in *After Ireland,* Declan Kiberd, Head of Zeus Press, 2017, Chapter 27: 'Claire Keegan: *Foster*', pp.455-67.
9) *The Scotsman,* 2010, 'Interview: Claire Keegan - 'A child's senses are not dulled by experience', at https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/books/interview-claire-keegan-a-child-s-senses-are-not-dulled-by-experience-1-477974, accessed November 20, 2019.
10) Claudia Luppino, p.8, 'The Old and the New in Claire Keegan's Short Fiction', *Journal of the Short Story in English* [online], 63, Autumn 2014, pp.1-14, accessed November 20, 2019.
11) See *The Guardian* 2010 interview, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/05/claire-keegan-short-story-interview, accessed November 20, 2019.
12) A child psychologist acquaintance commented on this scene that it would be appropriate only if the girl suffered from some handicap. Children who are much younger can do all these tasks without the intervention of an adult.
13) *After Ireland,* Kiberd, Chapter 27: 'Claire Keegan: *Foster*', pp.455-67, mention of naming, p.461.
14) Ibid. His explanation of this aspect of the story is not particularly convincing, even strained: 'To hide an experience is to imply that it carries a load of humiliation, a bad judgement from above. Secrecy in that sense may be bad: but the unspoken may betoken sensitivity and reverence. Yet, is there any ultimate difference?'